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Search for POWs in Laos Linked to CIA

Evidence hidden under court seal in Hawaii indicates that Col. James (Bo) Gritz went on his unsuccessful mission to find American war prisoners in Laos last year with at least initial support from the CIA and the Pentagon.

Gritz hinted at government support when he was freed from jail in Thailand last year, but it was never confirmed.

Hitherto undisclosed background on the Gritz foray into Laos is contained in an affidavit and accompanying exhibits in a federal fraud case against Ronald Ray Rewald in Honolulu.

Rewald says the investment firm he headed was a CIA front. The documents have been sealed by court order, but my associates Dale Van Atta and Indy Badhwar have seen copies.

Rewald stated that he passed along "classified intelligence data" to the CIA's Honolulu station chief, and that "the agency originally committed its support" to the secret Gritz mission.

Rewald said that although his investment firm "did supply a few thousand dollars to support the mission" at the CIA's behest, the agency was concerned that "word was leaking out" about the hush-hush operation. Rewald said the CIA chief asked him to brief the FBI's Honolulu agent-in-charge about the Gritz mission.

The bombshell of Rewald's exhibits is a confidential letter to Gritz on official stationery from the late lieutenant general Harold Aaron when he was deputy director of the Defense Intelligence Agency. What the letter will do for Rewald's case is not clear, but it establishes a clear Pentagon link to the ill-fated Gritz expedition into Laos.

Gritz has stated that it was Aaron who convinced him he should retire from the Army in 1979 and put together rescue missions in Laos under cover of a civilian job with Hughes Aircraft. But in the letter, Aaron wrote that he had "mixed emotions about your hanging it up to pursue this PW-MIA matter but, frankly, I don't know any other way of getting to the bottom of it all."

The general's letter continued:

"Bo, you have the experience and background to confirm this thing one way or another. Don't do anything to endanger your life or the lives of those we left behind. I am confident once you prove beyond a doubt that our men are still captive, the system will do the rest. Your task is not to be a one-man show, but to pull together evidence [to] convince political skeptics of PW existence."

Although "it is too bad we have to proceed this way," Aaron wrote, he went on to assure Gritz: "[DIA chief] Gen. [Eugene] Tighe is well aware of the situation but his hands are tied. He is a true soldier in a blue suit."

Aaron repeatedly urged Gritz to be discreet.

"Keep your government contacts limited to those with an absolute need to know," he wrote. "The word spreads fast here in Washington."

Gritz confirmed the existence of such a letter from Aaron. He said that he had never shown the confidential letter to anyone outside "channels" and had no idea how it was obtained by Rewald, whom he said he had never met.

Footnote: A Pentagon spokesman said the DIA conducted an investigation of the letter's authenticity. The results were inconclusive.